

“The Forgotten”

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In the days leading up to the dispatch of Canadian warships and aircraft to the Indian Ocean in the wake of the 11 September attacks we have heard time and again from Government of Canada sources, including Francoise Duclos of the PCO writing in The Economist magazine, that sending six ships and six aircraft manned by approximately 2000 personnel is the largest international deployment of Canadian forces since the Korean War. Such ill-informed assertions coupled with the need to spin the event in light of NATO pressure on Canada to contribute effective military forces contributes to the overshadowing and devaluing of fiftieth anniversary of Canada’s largest and longest overseas military deployment since the Second World War.

This is not the first time a Canadian government which had cut the armed forces to the bone was caught unprepared and had to scramble to send whatever was available. In 1950, three destroyers and two squadrons of transport aircraft were deployed to Korea, but it would take time to mobilize a brigade-sized Canadian Army Special Force to fight Communist aggression in the Far East. The real problem, however, was Europe. Canadian policymakers thought that extended operation in Korea by Communist powers was a feint to draw in Western resources so that Soviet subversion or even a direct attack against NATO members could succeed. It was absolutely critical that the imposition of a Soviet-run totalitarian system on Europe be deterred. Thousands of Canadians died only years before helping to throw off the yoke of Nazi totalitarianism. Their efforts would have been in vain had Stalin been permitted to bully and subdue a prostrate Western Europe.

Louis St Laurent and his government were faced with a choice: either Canada had interests worth protecting in Europe or she did not. If she did, then the only

means to do so was to commit salient and effective military forces to NATO's Integrated Force to deter war and then defend to Europe if deterrence failed. Wars are ultimately won on the ground: deploying 'limited liability' forces (as Canada did during the Gulf War of 1990-91 with the dispatch of three ships and two squadrons of aircraft equipped for 'defensive' operations) would only have secured Canada a peripheral role in European affairs and made little contribution to presenting a unified front against the forces aligned behind the Iron Curtain. The St Laurent Government chose to deploy land and air forces to NATO after carefully considering the alternatives.

The first commitment, called Operation PANDA, was a combined Militia-Regular Army brigade group of 5800 men. The men of 27 Canadian Infantry Brigade Group disembarked in Rotterdam on 21 November 1951 and moved to Hanover to stand alongside other NATO forces on the Inner German Border, face-to-face with units of the Red Army. 27 Brigade was eventually replaced in years to come with regular brigades drawn from an enlarged Canadian Army, but during the Crisis of 1951 (so declared by Maclean's magazine in public and by Cabinet in secret) these soldiers represented Canada's visible contribution to NATO solidarity and deterrence as they conducted exercise after exercise in full view of the adversary's intelligence systems. Unlike other NATO armies which were manned using conscription, the Canadians with 27 Brigade were all volunteers.

In February 1952, the first units conducting Operation LEAP FROG landed in the United Kingdom. This was the vanguard of No. 1 Air Division, Royal Canadian Air Force. This 5000-man formation eventually consisted of twelve squadrons of Canadian-built F-86 Sabre jet fighters and represented 25% of NATO's fighter strength in Western Europe the 1950s. No. 1 Air Division was deployed in France, West Germany, and for a time even protected the United Kingdom. No other nation in NATO had Canada's combination of cutting edge equipment wedded to the aggressive professionalism of its pilots and ground crew.

Operations PANDA and LEAP FROG were not merely the administrative deployment of Canadians to far-flung lands: they served as the basis of a 42-year

Canadian presence in Europe which brought a measure of security to our allies and afforded them direct exposure to Canadian culture. It is clear from declassified materials that these operations were primarily large-scale deterrent manouvres in a new type of war, one which was unfamiliar to policymakers then as the new war of today is unfamiliar to policymakers today. Canada's largest overseas deployment since Korea and the reasons for it should not be so tritely forgotten.

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